



## The BIG Thinkers

Leaving Certificate Politics and Society

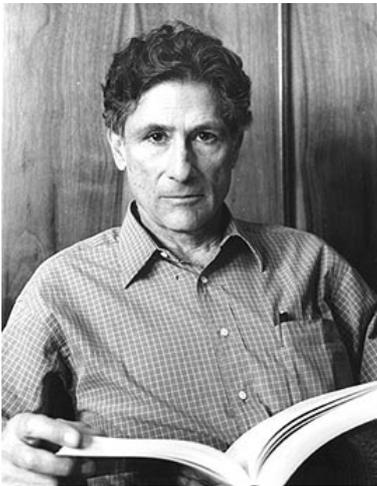
Edward W. Said



**Key Concepts:** interactions between cultures, cultural identities, cultural imperialism, constructions of 'us' and 'them', human rights - universal or a western construct?

# Edward W. SAID

(1935 to 2003)



## Influential work:

Said, E. 1978, *Orientalism*

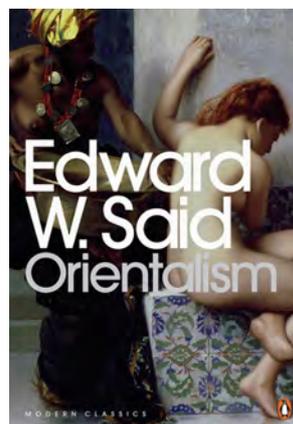
Said, E. 1993, *Culture and Imperialism*

Edward Said, was born in Jerusalem into a wealthy Palestinian family and later moved to New York where he was educated and became a university lecturer and political activist. Although he never taught any courses about the Middle East, he wrote numerous books and articles in support of Palestinian rights and the creation of an independent Palestinian state. He was highly critical of US and Israeli policy in the region, and this led him into controversy and criticism.

## **Orientalism**

Said's most influential book, *Orientalism* was published in 1978 and the key idea of the book was that Western knowledge about the East is not based upon facts or reality but on certain preconceived ideas and stereotypes. He argues that the West's (Occident) view of the East (Orient) came from a belief in cultural superiority and Western imperialism. By projecting people of the Orient and especially the Arab world as volatile, irrational, backward, vicious, tyrannical and threatening, the West has created a false and dangerous stereotype of 'otherness' and this has facilitated and justified western imperialism. Viewing the Orient in demeaning stereotypes has allowed people in the West to convince themselves that they are superior and therefore entitled to dominate and to "civilise" the "other".

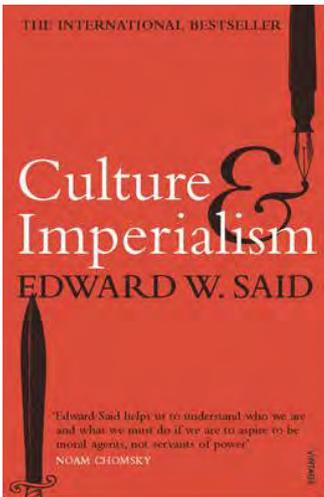
Although written in 1978, *Orientalism* is as relevant and controversial today as it was when first published. It challenges readers to question the stereotypes that relegate people who are different from to the role of 'others'. It also begs the question, whether human rights are universal or another example of western imposition and cultural imperialism.



*"Arabs, for example, are thought of as camel-riding, terroristic, hook-nosed, venal lechers whose undeserved wealth is an affront to real civilization.*

*Always there lurks the assumption that although the Western consumer belongs to a numerical minority, he is entitled either to own or to expend (or both) the majority of the world resources. Why? Because he, unlike the Oriental, is a true human being."*

Edward  
W.Said



## On cultural identity

In his later work, Said also challenges readers to question narrow concepts or definitions of identity, arguing that a person's identity is multifaceted and is always evolving. In *Culture and Imperialism* he writes:

*"No one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting-points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind. Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively, white, or Black, or Western, or Oriental. Yet just as human beings make their own history, they also make their cultures and ethnic identities. No one can deny the persisting continuities of long traditions, sustained habitations, national languages, and cultural geographies, but there seems no reason except fear and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness, as if that was all human life was about. Survival in fact is about the connections between things. It is more rewarding - and more difficult - to think concretely and sympathetically, contrapuntally, about others than only about "us." But this also means not trying to rule others, not trying to classify them or put them in hierarchies, above all, not constantly reiterating how "our" culture or country is number one (or not number one, for that matter)."*

## Edward Said's criticism of Samuel Huntington

Samuel Huntington's thesis, as set out in *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996), identifies seven or eight major civilisations and argued that the West is the most important. Huntington predicted that in a post-Cold War world *'the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics'*.

Edward Said was one of Huntington's most scathing critics. He wrote *"Rather than the manufactured clash of civilizations, we need to concentrate on the slow working together of cultures that overlap, borrow from each other, and live together in far more interesting ways than any abridged or inauthentic mode of understanding can allow."* (*Orientalism*)

He saw the clash of civilisations thesis as not only crude and simplistic but dangerous. He referred to Huntington's book as *'a crudely articulated manual in the art of maintaining a wartime status in the minds of Americans and others'*. Moreover, he said that what Huntington *'described as 'Islam' belongs to the discourse of Orientalism, a construction fabricated to whip up feelings of hostility and antipathy against a part of the world that happens to be of strategic importance.'* In other words, it fits into a stereotyped notion of the world that is used to justify foreign policy and military expenditure.

## Weblink

- [Orientalism as a tool of colonialism \(Youtube 10 minute video\)](#)